

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 27, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

We write today concerning the recent issuance of Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP) acceptance letters to Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) employees that offer \$15,000 less than what is permitted under federal law and what is standard in nearly all other cases. We are troubled by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) decision to lower VSIP payments by such a large amount, and we have serious concerns about the timing of this announcement and the burden it places on federal workers who have already endured significant hardship throughout this rushed relocation process.

On June 13, 2019, USDA informed ERS and NIFA employees that a limited number of VSIPs would be available to individuals who declined to relocate to the Kansas City Region by September 30, 2019. Employees were subsequently given a deadline of July 15, 2019 to notify USDA if they did not plan to relocate. Employees who wished to apply for buyouts were only given one week – July 22, 2019 through July 29, 2019 – to submit their applications. This is a short timeline to make a decision like this, especially considering that employees who accept these payments cannot work for the federal government for at least five years or are forced to return this payment.

Then, on August 20, 2019, those ERS and NIFA employees who received their VSIP acceptance letters found that their payments had been reduced from \$25,000 to \$10,000 – a reduction of 60 percent. Applicants were given only six days to accept or decline this payment by August 26, 2019. This expedited timeline places an undue burden on these employees who were led to believe they would be offered buyouts at or near the federal maximum. Traditionally, federal employees who resign with a VSIP have received close to the maximum amount of \$25,000. From Fiscal Year 2012 to May 2017, nearly 37,000 federal employees resigned with a VSIP for an average payment of \$24,470.<sup>1</sup>

USDA has stated that its decision to reduce the amount per VSIP was made in order to accommodate all employees who were eligible to receive the buyout. However, USDA has failed to explain why employees were not notified earlier that VSIP offers would be significantly less than \$25,000, considering the agency already knew that more than half of ERS and NIFA employees had declined to relocate by the time VSIP applications were due.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/115/crpt/srpt330/CRPT-115srpt330.pdf>

We are troubled that USDA did not relay this information to its employees sooner considering the impacts this decision can have on an individual's career.

In response to this announcement, we would like to pose the following questions regarding VSIP payments:

- How much does USDA have budgeted for VSIP payments, and from what authority?
- Why was USDA not prepared to offer the maximum buyout payment or near the maximum to employees when that appears to be standard procedure among federal agencies?
- Why were employees not notified ahead of the VSIP application window that the maximum buyout payment would be significantly less than the federal maximum?

As senators representing the National Capital Region, we remain opposed to this proposed relocation. However, should this process continue to move forward, we expect federal employees be treated with dignity and respect. We urge you to reconsider this decision and offer these employees the maximum VSIP payment allowable by law and extend the deadline for employees to consider these payments.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,




Mark R. Warner  
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator



Tim Kaine  
United States Senator